BEAUTY IN LETTERS

"LET THANKS BE TO ALLAH," says some character in a Kipling story, when old friends gather after long changes and separations in wartime, "that He has not terminated all the Delights!"

No, nor will He, while the miracle of beauty lives on and on, caged for us, captured for us, between the covers of beloved books.

Yesterday and today treat us cruelly, and we fear tomorrow. Life, although it takes us many years and many tears to discover it, life is only another name for death; they cannot exist independently. The child just born is already beginning the dull process of dying. Youth dies, physical perfection and beauty die, friendships die, love vanishes, vanity is mortally hit, pride goes down in the dust. The years bring us surprises increasingly painful; we marvel innocently at life's swiftness, its shortness, its unimportance, at our own ineffectual groping.

School-day agonies and fears, the teacher that laughed at us, the lost circus tickets,—are gone like a dream. The mating years are dim in the past, with the dance that was a failure, the invitation that did not come, the week-end that was one long triumph of fun and popularity. All gone. . . .

And gone the speculations and doubts of early marriage, not all good, not all bad; the first year, the first five, the first ten are over and done with. The endless months of waiting for the baby, the croupy nights, the threat of a neighboring lawsuit, the worry about the lost trunk and the mislaid deed, these have flown by like the slits in a zoetrope. Gray hair is no longer a joke, to be merrily explained away as premature, as characteristic in the family. Wrinkles, this time, are not going to disappear after a little rest and restored weight.

All this hurts and puzzles us extremely. If we are really to be so soon done for, we wonder what we were begun for, anyway. If stupid mistakes, made in ignorant youth, are to grow to great vines, and strangle us in middle life, then the game is not quite fair, we don't know the rules, we refuse to play with anything like the old enthusiasm.

Our mood becomes quieter, soberer, a little watchful, a little affronted. It is all too short, this delusion called living, too jumbled, too hurried. What we have won, putting youth and hope and courage and labor generously into the scales—what we have won wasn't worth winning. The real things have somehow escaped our eager fingers.

Baffled, we withdraw with dignity into the world of the mind. What success and money and fame refuse us, we can always find in those shady forests rich with sun and moon tracery, filled with exquisite

images, threaded with the moving figures of the great who have preceded us, who have stepped in between the covers of books.

For if, at the end of the saddest, the most disappointing and hurtful day, each one of us may come to a quiet room somewhere, and that room his own, if there is a light burning above white pillows, and a pile of books waiting under the light, then indeed we may still praise Allah, that He has not terminated all the Delights.

Even in a day reasonably full of service and occupation, friendship, movement through the busy streets, breakfast, lunch, dinner, telephone, a day full of everyday fatigues and interests, there is no moment comparable to this one, that finds the harassed spirit in blessed solitude, the tired body resting, the gypsy mind off to palms and lazy surf in Tahiti, or cresting the rough salty waves of some northern sea.

Beauty,—healing, miraculous, inexhaustible,—lives on in books, even when beauty elsewhere is dead. The clearing-house of the brain, the wings of the spirit, books lift us away from the petty, crowded day's smallness and entanglement. Trifles no longer concern us,—with Plague stalking in London Town, or Caponsacchi and Pompilia leaving Rome in sunset light. We must accompany our friends through greater crises than our lives will ever know, and when we leave them our own sense of balance and proportion is once more restored.

The actual Bay of Naples may lose something of its charm for the arriving traveler; he has trunks, checks, and hotel reservations on his mind, at best. At worst he adds to these anxieties a natural concern for his missing overcoat,—could he have left it at the Palermo hotel?—a faint consciousness that too much auction bridge has brought back the eye-strain, and a humiliated conviction that he has overtipped those stewards again. Perhaps the sky is clouding over ominously, perhaps Vesuvius is not acting in a way to please a hurried visitor; the volcano was infinitely more thrilling last week, and may be even better yet next month. Perhaps some member of the party has enthusiastically allied us with those awful Scotts, from Detroit, for the Pompeiian expedition tomorrow.

Even Barbadoes harbor—Barbadoes, on a still, silky-blue June morning!—may be completely spoiled by a murmuring steamer-acquaintance at one's ear. The woman who was heard saying loudly, in a pianissimo passage, at the opera, "We fry ours in lard!" is a traveler, too, as well as a music-lover. The golf fiend travels, the divorced woman with a grievance travels, the woman who collected funds for the new community club building travels.

But none of these, on a winter evening at home, can penetrate into the pages of De Quincey and Field Marshal Roberts; their voices cannot break the exquisite solitude in which Shelley heard a skylark, or a melon-flower took one rugged old poet's heart back to spring in England.

Books better than reality?—Yes, I think so. In some cases they are, anyway. Perhaps certain tourists in London love it more than we love

it who found London years ago, in the pages of Thackeray and Fielding and the Kingsleys and Sterne. Perhaps they get from the modern, electric-lighted, much-motored London of today, with its chocolate signs and its movies, its clean pavements and twinkling teashop windows, more than we got from the London of books. But I doubt it. Ours was the truer, the realer London, who read about it when we were young, years and years and years ago, and who threaded its dark and dirty streets hand in hand with the magicians who wrote the books we loved.

We knew the mysterious Thames as they can never know it who look down upon it from the safe warm dining rooms of the Cecil or the Savoy; we saw it grim and menacing, the sinister lights of coffee houses and pubs shedding an eerie glow upon it, strange characters oaring to and fro upon its tides; we spoke of the Strand and the Marshalsea and Limehouse as familiarly as their inhabitants ever did.

To be lying, at fifteen, in a field of California oats and poppies, and at the same time to be fingering frugal pennies for the purchase of fried fish at a smoky stall in the Old Roman Road, or to be bumping in a tumbril through the streets of eighteenth-century Paris, is to be part of a magic that the most fortunate tourist in the world can never know.

The lover of books is a miner, searching for gold all his life long. He finds his nuggets, his heart leaps in his breast; he cannot believe in his good fortune. Traversing a slow page, to come upon a lode of the pure shining metal is to exult inwardly for greedy hours. It belongs to no one else; it is not interchangeable.

"Ha!" says the reader involuntarily, as one struck. A casual bystander may ask what stirs him.

"Nothing. Only this is—some of this is good," he mumbles grudgingly. He is immersed again.

But to find beauty in great books is an art. It must be cultivated, like all the arts. Every second-hand bookstore contains a million raptures. But only one out of every five hundred persons ever thinks of going into a second-hand bookshop, and only one out of every score of those knows what he wants, and how to find it.

The violinist, the astronomer, the doctor are resigned to days, months, years of patient study, to endless effort and experiment. They know that they must dig deep into the hard, resisting earth before the crystal waters of any art will begin to flow. They must suspect, surmise, hypothecate. What part of their work these laborers can do easily, in the beginning, they soon learn to despise, they cast it aside. For years they must do what they do not like, must persist in what is difficult and thankless.

We all see that, for them. But what we do not see is that book-reading is a fine art, too, perhaps the highest and finest of them all; we do not arrive at its perfection overnight. Thoreau's *Walden,* Emerson's *Essays* we know must be good, because they are being eternally republished in the little leather classics; and then there are always the *Iliad,* and *Paradise Lost,* and Dante, books we have always meant to read.

But *Murder in a Nunnery*—incidentally, one of the best of its type—is certain to be easier reading. People are talking about it, too, and who ever hears any talk nowadays about Homer or Milton?

And after the *Murder in a Nunnery* there is always the cross-word puzzle in the evening paper, or a not-too-imbecile movie around the corner.

Thus we stroll comfortably through the shallows under which lies the lode of pure gold.

Gold it is. To buy a neat new book, *Excerpts from Shakespeare,* is sacrilege, and whoso does it is repaid by nothing but boredom.

But to read steadily through the Tragedies and come legitimately upon—well, say that matchless page in which fatuous old Pandarus stands with Cressida watching the return of the Roman warriors, is to taste Delight indeed. Henry Percy provokingly baiting his pompous uncle, or the exquisite Cleopatra turning valet when Anthony arms for the wars, these are more alive at this moment than many of the living folk with whom we have talked in the course of the day. Your true Shakespeare lover cannot read certain of these pages continuously. He must shut the book now and then, and stare into space a moment, recovering his breath.

And like the aviator, he must have his hundred hours of daring the blue before he feels his wings secure beneath and about him.

One must know all of Emily Dickinson, to begin to glimpse the faint little vanishing drift of woodsmoke that really was Emily Dickinson. The shyness of her, the boldness of her, the flaming joy and agony of her love, the cloistered years when bashful glasses of her currant jelly, each with its diamond verse, were all that even her closest and dearest knew of her, these are not to be captured by any casual eye.

"Parting is all we know of Heaven, and all we need of Hell," says this most authentic of all our poets' voices. And of great grief she gives us a matchless line: "some losses are so great, we measure them by gain!"

Ringleted, hoop-skirted little New England spinster, "disappointed in love," who else ever captured for us, as you have done, the heart-breaking beauty of the reluctant northern seasons, matching some other mystical seasons in your own being?

Who else ever longed "for a bee's experience of clovers and of noon," or set November in eight lines? These lines:

"The sky is low, the clouds are mean,
A traveling flake of snow
Across a barn or through a rut
Debates if it will go.
A narrow wind complains all day
How someone treated him;
Nature, like us, is sometimes caught
Without her diadem."

In response to a letter praising her work,—work which only once or twice in her lifetime she permitted other eyes than her own to see—Emily Dickinson ends a breathless answer with a spontaneous burst of verse.

". . . as if I asked the Orient
Had it for me a morn?
And it should ope its purple gates
And shatter me with dawn!"

she writes, shattering us completely with her own more subtle dawn.

And all this—this "music that is too grievous of the height for safe and low delight," brings us to the almost unbearable climax, the last flying message of all, when her bewildered child-heart had somehow stumbled through all the green, still Junes, and all the snowy Novembers, to the end, and when she penciled to two girl nieces who loved her only the two words: "Called back!"

One closes the book, and goes out into the bright commonplace daylight dazed and hurt. Emily Dickinson is dead.

Equally, it is necessary, it is imperative, to read every word of Strachey's *Queen Victoria* to get the value, to appreciate the sheer beauty and daring and imagination of that final passage that paints the failing old monarch who is about to close her eyes on England, remembering—remembering the days of her power and glory. Remembering her great ministers, and her widowhood, and going back beyond that to Albert's nearness and dearness, Albert's help close beside her when the world was rocked with battles, with international problems. And beyond that again to youth—the first adored baby—"this first wonderful year of my reign," and a royal girlhood at Canterbury, and poor Uncle Willie's failing health—and so to the Archbishop, upon his knees in the cool summer morning, and the sheltered, German-governessed childhood, "and some friendly flounces of sprigged muslin, and the trees and grass at Kensington."

These discoveries, these joys, naturally, are not for the skimmer. What is Steerforth to him, or he to Steerforth? He has not followed David through that lonely cheated childhood into his first rush of hero-worshipping friendship. He has not flushed, as David must have flushed, with shame and pleasure, under Steerforth's negligent, "Why, you are a very Daisy!" His eyes are dry, when David says good-by to his sleeping friend, in one of those passages that will save Dickens for us when Thackeray and Scott are forgotten.

"Never again, oh, Steerforth, Steerforth, to touch that passive hand in love and friendship,—never, never more!"

How many thousand pages of Dickens, you lovers of the greatest English novelist of them all, how many thousand pages had we read,

slowly, savoringly, before we came to the tea party on Rumpty's perch, with Rumpty himself running eagerly for another pint of milk, another threepenny loaf, and with lovely, gracious, whimsical, maddening Bella making love to her wistful little drudge of a father, on an office window seat? How long were we faithful to Dickens before Tulkinghorn came down to Sir Leicester's seat in Lincolnshire and trapped Lady Deadlock in her own past?

"Of remorse, of explanation," says Lady Deadlock, beautiful, stricken, cold, in her exquisite robes, in the exquisite moonlight, "I say nothing to you. If I were not dumb, you must be deaf to any such words from me!"

When Dick Swiveller begins to reward the Marchioness's ridiculous devotion with his careless love, when Sydney Carton plays a certain game of cards, when little Paul—so small and weak and uninterested at the school party!—goes down to the healing seashore with Florence—ah, what heart-stopping, what heart-filling moments a reader knows! What oases in the long, dry search across the sands.

It was not for the skimmer that William Stirling wrote his all too-scanty pages, that Tomlinson conquered sea and jungle as Balboa never conquered them, that Stevenson fared forth on donkey back.

The skimmer laughs at Mark Twain. Mark Twain was the great humorist, one must laugh at him. That is enough for the skimmer.

But the children of the Kingdom of Books know that sweeter than any laughter it is to find, among the highways and byways of Clemens's more than two hundred tales, those things that do not make for laughter, those direct and poignantly touching passages that reach the source of tears instead. They are everywhere. They are in *Tom Sawyer* and in *Huckleberry Finn,* sudden flashes of surpassing sorrowful beauty and truth, sudden revelations of something deeper than mirth.

For sure and heart-breaking beauty, read into their own particular tale, I know nothing more telling in all Mark Twain's work than a sentence or two in an insignificant story supposedly funny; the name is something like "Every Man His Own Courier," and the tone, at the beginning, anyway, hilarious. But presently Mark gets into deep water, loses tickets, mislays umbrella, forgets time-table, returns to the trusting women at the hotel confessedly inefficient.

And it is then that he defines for us, in a few simple, infinitely pathetic words, that weakness that we all feel for the praise of those we love, our confusion and shame, our shallow, pitiful bravado when we fail them. Nobody else who ever lived could have written those phrases—not as he wrote them. And reading that story, one muses, "Fun may have made him popular. But the heart that dictated that passage made him great."

To the reader who "can't get into" the Russian novels, and who "read a part of" this or that by Tolstoi, how could one possibly describe the thrill with which one shares a certain hot summer morning with a puz-

zled, gentle, rural landowner, following the plow over the rich earthy furrows, listening to the peasants' talk, and finally stooping to drink from a dipper "filled with clear warm spring water, in which bits of grass and leaves were floating"? Detached, this means nothing. But discovered inadvertently, as the simple hero discovered it, when his troubled heart was so much in need of nature's healing, it makes one once more a child, one with the beauty and bigness of a summer field.

There is a talk, in Anna's bedroom at night, in that same story, between the beautiful Madame Karénina and her drab little sister-in-law, that is like the turning of a searchlight upon the hearts not only of those two women but of all women. Yet it is an insignificant talk, during which the older, plainer woman is miserably conscious of her own virtuous nightgown, high and tucked and practical and coarse, and of Anna's thrillingly fragile finery. One wants to tear the pages to minute pieces and put them under the microscope, determined to drag from them the secret of their power.

How many written words did the old Russian master destroy before he wrote that scene to his liking? How many seas did Balboa sail? "What of the way to the end?" asks Robert Browning. We neither know nor care, as long as it is ours to share the treasure they found at the foot of the rainbow.

And speaking of Browning, the lover of beautiful words who is not at home in the "wonder and the wild desire" of him knoweth not bad from good. To quote the words "a ring without a posy, and that ring mine?" is to quote nothing. But to find them, written into the text through which that great broken heart was struggling somehow to recapture its "lyric love," its "half-angel and half-bird," is to share with him something of the agony and the ecstasy that found in the end perhaps the most exquisite "posy" of all that ever went into any fortunate woman's love-ring.

"A ring without a posy, and that ring mine?"

If Browning had never written "One Word More," the world of words in matchless combination would have been the poorer. Greater than any of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry is the poetry she inspired in him. To her, as his "moon of poets," he points out that Raphael, "Raphael of the dear Madonnas," wrote one sonnet, to the woman he loved, and that when Dante loved he changed his art, too, for the beloved woman, and painted her a picture.

"You and I," says Browning to his wife—

"You and I would rather see that angel,
Painted with the tenderness of Dante,
Would we not?—than read a fresh Inferno."

Simple, simple words, as simple as Ruth in tears amid the alien corn, as simple as Louise Imogen Guiney's shower-stricken earth, and earth-

colored streams. But for all their artless simplicity we cannot analyze or fathom them.

—And they are such legions! They are hiding everywhere, beautiful, unforgettable phrases, pages of exquisite description in Stevenson and Morris, pages in Conrad and Henley. There is the hot, shining summer sunset in *Adam Bede,* when Hetty lingers with Adam among the currant bushes, and supper is waiting in the cool, deep-silled kitchen of the Poyser farm, there are all the prim New England ways of Sarah Orne Jewett, with the sea shining at the end of every crooked little hollyhock-lined, maple-shaded street. There are a thousand lines of incomparable clarity in any one of a dozen of Hudson's books—notably in a child's memories of Argentina, of the pampas country, the book he called *Far Away and Long Ago;* there are sunsets in Hardy's books, and sunrises, there is a stark, pure loveliness about Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* that makes even a dour Scotch parsonage and a family of unbalanced and badly nourished spinsters seem enchanting.

But how choose scores, among so many hundreds, and how express, in any case, the debt we owe them, and the mystery of their straining—their great need to say what they said just as they said it?

Kipling expresses it, expresses the unattainable ideal of them all, little and big, when he says, of the Perfect Vision,

"Thy face is far from this our war,
Our call and counter-cry,
I shall not find Thee quick and kind,
Nor know Thee till I die.
Enough for me in dreams to see
And touch Thy garment's hem;
Thy feet have trod so near to God
I may not follow them."

And as we rise to the heights, in all humility we learn this. We may not follow. The path leads straight away from this little world,—up, up to the stars.

" 'Tis to have drunk too well the drink that is divine," says Francis Thompson, complaining, in words that are themselves immortal in beauty, of the "mystic wall of strange felicity, the incredible excess of unsensed sweet."

" 'Tis to have drunk too well the drink that is divine, maketh the kind earth waste, and life intolerable."

Our own American poet, Edna St Vincent Millay, says it not less well, in half-a-dozen wonderful lines about early spring in New England.

"I had forgotten how the frogs would sound
After a year of silence, or I think

I would not thus have ventured forth alone
At dusk, upon this unfrequented road.
I am beset by Beauty. Who will stand
Between me and the crying of the frogs . . . ?"

To anyone who has ever walked a twilight road, in that chill sweet hush that comes over the world in April, before even the willows are green, but after the brooks start rushing, there is something higher than mortal glory in such words, the written page holds more of young spring than even the fields and meadows do. Who will stand between us and this devastating pen, indeed?

Greatest of all, simplest of all, come with splitting light and force the phrases of the Carpenter. Caught by the ears of peasants, filtered through their slow pens, we still must shade our eyes away from them, even after two thousand years:

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they labor not, neither do they spin. . . ."
"He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone. . . ."
"Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. . . ."
"I will arise, and will go to my father, and say unto him: Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee: I am not worthy to be called thy son."

What would our life, our civilization, be without these words, and words like these? It would be the life and civilization of animals in a jungle, or cows grazing endlessly in a field. Animals never cry, or laugh, or dream of anything but clover tops and tree shade. Animals never joke; theirs is but a brief knowledge of grief. The cat that loses her kittens, the cow that loses her calf—these cry for a few hours, and eat, and forget.

They feel no kinship with Tennyson, watching the gray seas break on an English coast, or with the father of "W.V.," who made a radiant little daughter's short life only a little less exquisite than her death. Without David's grief for his "little lad," and the thousand songs and sonnets that it has inspired, we should have lost one of our permanent heritages.

Our lives are quick with more and more intensified emotions. We do more than our forbears did, see more, feel more. Above all, we love more; the harsh father, the cruel stepmother and uncles, the scornful and jealous sisters of the fairy tales and the old novels are vanishing from our midst. Even to the criminal, even to the nameless, superfluous baby of the slums, our concern, our affection goes out, in a way that was never dreamed in Dante's or in Shakespeare's day, or even in Dickens's time.

And in our quickened lives we need more and more the guidance and sustenance of inspired words. They show us how to live.

As for dying—who could die unchanged and untouched, who could

die afraid, if in a rambling lifetime of reading he had chanced upon "Ben Ezra" or "Prospice," if he had found those pages in Jowett that tell how Socrates died? The fear of death fades—it dies away—under the contemplation of that death that was life itself, and those strange, living words, "Into Thy hands, O Father, I commend my spirit."

A life-term in any prison—the prison of illness, or poverty, or humdrum petty routine—holds no terrors, holds rather a promise, for the lover of true books. He knows that Keats and Shelley, Newman and Dryden and Emerson and Thoreau and Browne and a thousand others have yielded unto him only a tithe of their sweetness; from one stout volume of Whitman or Wordsworth he will gather enough honey to make bearable even the hardest sentence, for his sixty or seventy years —even the dullest.

Life without books would be, to him, the only real prison. Books are the stairs by which his years and his soul must mount,—from *Nick Carter* and *Little Women* to Dickens and Tennyson,—on through the biographies, the histories, the essays. And so to poetry, and so to mysticism, and so up—up—up from the shadow of living into the light.